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kyoko kumai

projects

**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

May 3 - June 18, 1991



Wavy Wind. 1987. Stainless-steel fiber, 6'6" x 16'4" x 32'9". Photo Takashi Hatakeyama, courtesy the artist

I approach the metal wire, it takes an unforeseen turn and forms itself into the shape that I have in mind. At other times, it is the wire itself that expresses a desire to take on a certain shape and my role is to assist it. . . . There is something grand, even mystical, about this process by which cold, unfeeling metal wire, mass-produced in an inorganic manner at some factory, passes through me and undergoes a metamorphosis through which it takes on an organic and truly sensual quality.

—Kyoko Kumai

One of today's leading Japanese fiber artists, Kyoko Kumai creates monumental and unconventional fabrics. Over the past twenty years, her work has evolved from textiles made of traditional fibers such as wool and cotton to those made exclusively of metallics. Her stainless-steel fiber works range from two-dimensional woven wall hangings to sculptural installations that abandon traditional weaving techniques altogether.

The manufacture of textiles is perhaps the oldest continuous industry in the world. For more than seven thousand years, until the first man-made fibers were introduced at the end of the nineteenth century, the development of textiles was primarily about organic fibers and utility. In the late nineteenth century, a general discontent with the inferior quality of industrial production led the Arts and Crafts Movement to unify traditional crafts, such as weaving, with the fine arts. Later, in the 1920s, the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus encouraged creative experimentation with new synthetic fibers and finishes, promoting a machine aesthetic but continuing to work within the confines of industry.

A complete break with the traditional forms of textiles and tapestries did not occur until the 1960s, when a general

reevaluation of the medium placed it firmly within the context of twentieth-century art. Reacting to an age in which the craft movement was growing within a powerful technological society, some artists working with fiber tried to separate themselves completely from industry. Creating what is now commonly called fiber art or art fabric, they began constructing and manipulating works completely free of the loom. Lenore Tawney's cruciform-shaped weavings and Ted Hallman's tall, tubular monoliths of the early 1960s reflected a movement away from the restrictions of a rectangular format toward more three-dimensional, sculptural forms. Fiber works not only were attached to

walls but became independent structures like Sheila Hicks's 1968 *Evolving Tapestry*, composed of stacking modular units that were wrapped and looped. Woven forms and sculpture became virtually indistinct.

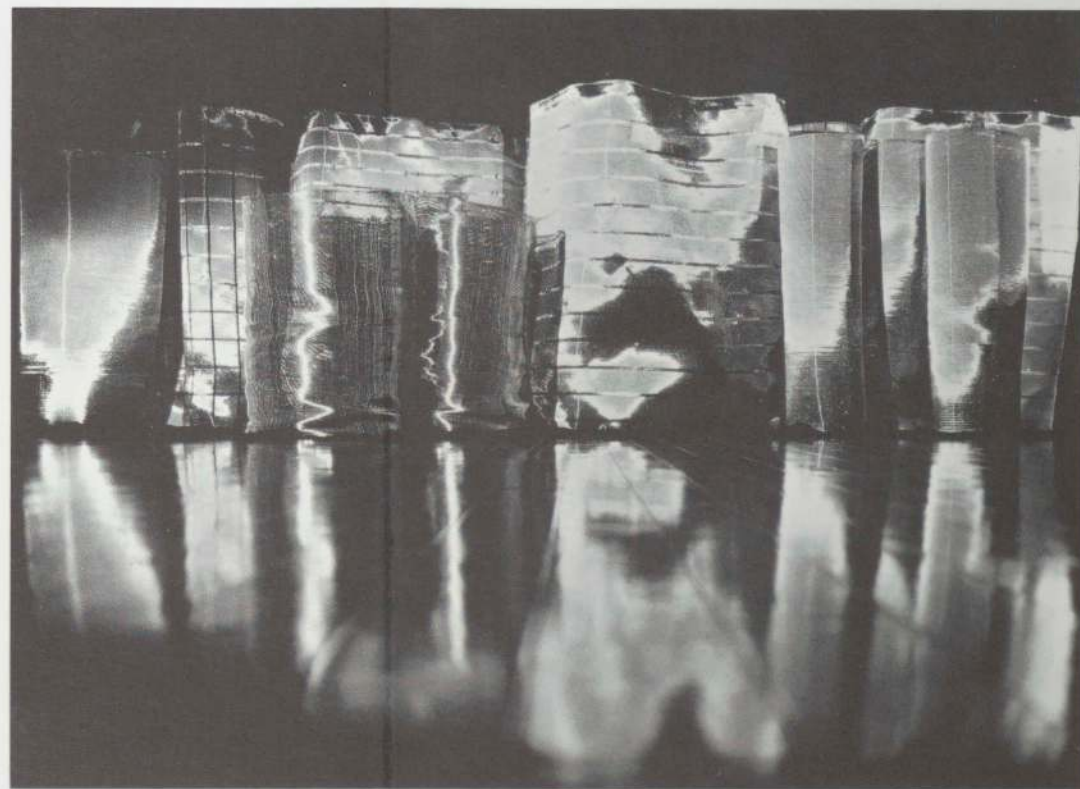
Educated at Tokyo University in the visual arts, Kyoko Kumai has been a self-taught weaver since the late sixties, when she was inspired by the non-traditional fiber work of Tsuneko Fujimoto. This was almost a decade before significant Japanese participation in the fiber-arts movement. The artist has been using stainless steel for fifteen years, and, since 1983, has employed it exclusively. Her use of man-made fiber recalls the work of two major fiber artists, Ed Rossbach and Arturo Sandoval, who were among the first to use inorganic material in their work. Their repertoire of materials has included plastic, Mylar, and newspaper, and, like Kumai's, their works comment on aspects of modern society.

Kumai's greatest influence is perhaps the Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, whose sculptural forms led fiber out of the confines of traditional weaving. Abakanowicz herself said that "it was not weaving that my weaving was about." Rather, her work is about the abstraction and

interpretation of nature, the organic environment in which we live. Her large Abakans of the mid-1960s evoke a vast primeval forest as the raw, hairy carpet made from animal hair mixed with tarred and colored sisal looms over the viewer. The sheer enormity of the Abakans, common to many of Kumai's works, bespeaks nature's power. But whereas Abakanowicz insists on using organic fibers, Kumai uses industrial material to express nature.

Her installation *Wavy Wind* (1987) conjures up images of turbulent clouds, a deluge, a rolling landscape. But, like many of her other works, it maintains a clear visual relation to industrially produced, non-woven fabrics. In the catalogue accompanying The Museum of Modern Art's 1956 exhibition *Textiles USA*, Arthur Drexler remarked that although industrial fabrics are rarely designed for aesthetic effect, they seem beautiful because they heighten properties familiar to us in other materials. The delicacy and pronounced texture of some industrial fabrics, for example, are comparable to the finest qualities of Belgian lace. Similarly, the primary component of *Air* is industrial wire, but, through careful manipulation of the wire, Kumai reveals a suppleness and flexibility, transforming this hard metal into a weightless and intricate net.

Air was constructed with a technique that Kumai has developed during the past six years. As she and her assistants pull dozens of spools of stainless-steel wire, they manipulate the wire in curls and coils. As it lies on the floor, the wire is stretched outward from the center like an expanding pie crust, gaining in size as the spools of wire continue to be unwound. Once the size has been established, Kumai goes back over the work with a shuttle, loosely sewing the thousands of feet of curled wire. She binds it further from a hanging position, giving it more form and volume. In the installation, nylon



Frozen Wind. 1985-87. Stainless-steel fiber, 33'4" x 4'4" x 33'4". Photo Yozo Fujita, courtesy the artist

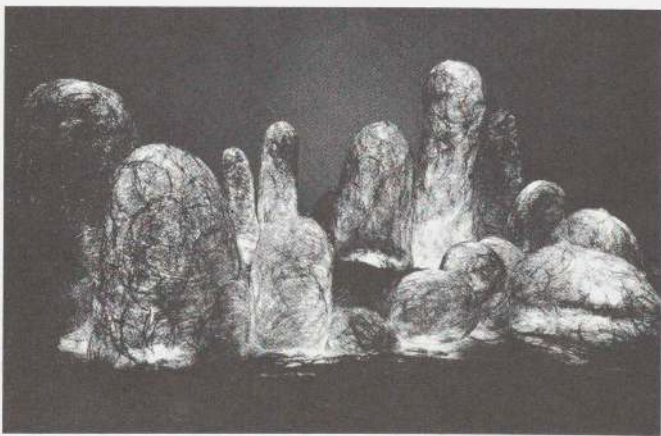
monofilament suspends the work, pulling and punctuating areas of the fabric and revealing its sculptural quality. The result is an undulating and weightless landscape of stainless steel.

The juxtaposition of technological symbols with tradition and nature is not unusual in contemporary Japanese culture. It alludes to the Japanese concept of "sabi," an acceptance of the passage of time, which regards all phenomena as existing at a temporary stage. The character of nature changes when Kumai, in *Windy Earth in the Night* (1990), dramatically imposes a blanket of stainless steel on the landscape. Groundcovering is transformed into something man-made.

This work also affirms the same sense of control over nature that is experienced in Japanese gardens. While the placement of a single stone step may seem natural or serendipitous, it determines the circulation in order to reveal a view or microcosm of the natural world created by the gardener. The spontaneous and the accidental happen only with the most purposeful thoughts in mind.

Most indicative of the Japanese sense of beauty in Kumai's work is the importance of light, both its presence and calculated absence. In the Japanese sensibility, beauty resides not always in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness. Shadows become calligraphic lines in *Air*, and their movement captures the spirit of turbulent wind. In his book *In Praise of Shadows*, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki noted that "a phosphorescent jewel gives off its glow and color in the dark and loses its beauty in the light of day. Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty."

Matilda McQuaid
Assistant Curator
Department of Architecture and Design



Prayer. 1990. Stainless-steel fiber, 13'4" x 6'8" x 13'4". Photo Yasunori Takeuchi, courtesy the artist

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cover: *Wavy Wind* (detail)

biography

Kyoko Kumai
Born Tokyo, Japan, 1943
Lives in Oita, Japan
Professor, Oita Prefectural Junior Art College

Education

- 1966 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Tokyo University of Arts

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1990 Plus Minus Gallery, Tokyo
1988 Gallery Gallery, Kyoto
1987 Oita Prefectural Art Museum, Oita
1986 Gallery Ameria, Tokyo
1985 Striped House Museum, Tokyo
1984 Yamagiwa Livina Gallery, Tokyo
1983 Inui Gallery, Tokyo

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1990 *8th International Miniature Textile Biennial*,
Hungary
Suntory Prize '90; Suntory Museum, Tokyo
- 1989 *1st Perth International Craft Triennial*,
Perth, Australia
Chi Sui Ka Fu, Azabu Arts & Crafts Museum,
Tokyo
- 1988 *7th International Miniature Textile Biennial*,
Hungary
- 1987 *13th International Tapestry Biennial*,
Lausanne, Switzerland
- 1986 *Fiber Art Japan*, Taipei City Gallery,
Republic of China
Kyushu Craft Design Exhibition,
Fukuoka (Grand Prix)
- 1983 *Japan Craft Design Exhibition*, Tokyo (Excellent Prize)
- 1982 *Michoacan International Exhibition of
Miniature Textiles*, Mexico
- 1980 *Fiber As Art*, Metropolitan Museum,
Manila, Philippines

Selected Bibliography

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